Sorting, Telling, & Keeping: A Study of Intrusive Narratives in Relation to Identity Formation in Don DeLillo's *White Noise*

Research Thesis

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By
Zac Botkins

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Project Advisors: Professor Jessica Prinz, Department of English
Professor James Phelan, Department of English

“If you reveal everything, bare every feeling, ask for understanding, you lose something crucial to your sense of yourself. You need to know things the others don't know. It's what no one knows about you that allows you to know yourself.”

-Don DeLillo, *Point Omega*

ABSTRACT

There seems to be two plots at work within the pages of Don DeLillo's *White Noise*: one plot that contends plotting, in itself, inherently moves deathward; and another plot that defiantly regards plot formation as a structural necessity for coherent identity formation, thus proposing not only that to plot is to live, but that one cannot identify themselves without plot formation. I intend to focus on the tension that arises between the two as they clash against each other, not only in the aforementioned novel, but specifically through examining the tension between narrative identity and the intrusive narratives of society posited within the novel's protagonist Jack Gladney. Even further, I examine this in relation to the "universal third man" societal philosophy of Jean-Francois Lyotard. I am hoping to explore the interwoven relations of each viewpoint and the somewhat surprising, if not ironic, connections that arise upon further contemplation of each stance. I intend to juxtapose the ideology of "deathward plots" (such as the nega-narrative and identity failure) with that of the plots of the living (adaptive narrative identity and the societal narrative of consumerism), using each to explore the tension between modernist and postmodernist concepts within each.

In relation to the novel's protagonist, I intend to depict Gladney in a new light, not as a modern character in a postmodern society, but instead as a binary character offering exemplary models of both.[1] Furthermore, I intend to highlight the conflict that this creates in relation to Gladney's formation of an individual, coherent identity. While Jack Gladney is often discussed as an opponent to the postmodern theory of Murray, I want to examine the shared traits between the two, both in ideological positions and in the representations of their narrative identities. Taking into account the permeating capabilities of the varying "white noise" prevalent in the novel, it is my intention to highlight the attack on narrative formation, and its effects upon character development and identity formation through a close study of the way narrative threats are *masked* within the mimetic society in *White Noise*. It is my hope that I will be able to formulate an argument that identifies Jack as a transfusion of modernist and postmodernist narrative theory. It is this very same transfusion that causes so much tension, both within the novel, and within Jack's character as he struggles to understand, balance, and embrace these theories. Finally, I intend to trace these themes against Jack's struggle to identify himself through a process of self-censorship and open expression (what I call a process of sorting, telling, and keeping). I will do this by examining the nightly open dialogues of Babette and Jack as a place of identity formation and reconciliation, one that is shattered by the synthetic narrative of DeLillo's *White Noise,* and how Jack's identity crumbles at the lack of someone to confer with.

[1]This is written in direct reference to the 1991 essay by Leonard Wilcox entitled, "Baudrillard, DeLillo's White Noise, and the End of Heroic Narrative." The essay also seeks to reconcile the tension between Gladney and the society surrounding him within the novel. More importantly, it seeks to ascertain the moments of theoretical collision within the novel, and to prescribe a literary reasoning to them. For this, Wilcox incorporates Baudrillard, focusing on his postmodernist theories as he works his way through the novel, and contrasting the Baudrillardian society, as well as Murray, against the Modern Gladney.

In their book *Postmodern Theory: Critical Interrogations* Steven Best and Douglas Kellner discuss the postmodern attack on narratives when they write, "For at all stages, Lyotard sharply attacks modern discourses and theories, while attempting to develop new discourses, writing strategies, politics, and perspectives" (Best 147). In a similar way, the societal surroundings of Jack, with the consumerist markets, the simulacra of "reality", the rapidly developing hyper reality of the internet, and the lingering "death" that Jack fears will define his life, all become representative of the mimetic aspects of society attempting to breach Jack's narrative. Even further, they directly represent DeLillo's thematic molds throughout the novel. In this depiction, it is my hope to bring to the surface the subsequent tension within the character, offering it as an individually personified display of the effects identity failure in light of the clashing ideologies portrayed on a societal level in *White Noise*. Furthermore, I am hoping to identify Jack's journey throughout the novel as the transfusing of these ideologies, and to explore the significance and end result of these transformations. To begin this, the first objective is to identify the most outlying attitudes that attempt to rectify the usage and meaning of plot formation within the novel. The first perspective identifies plot as a crucial act utilized by the individual, or in our case, Jack Gladney, to form "a life story that coheres with the person he considers himself to be at any given moment" (Wiese 7).[2] Jack doesn't simply formulate a plot of himself, however, as his attempts to understand himself first begin with an attempt to understand those around him through narration. This external narration begins as early as the first page of the novel, in which Jack carefully and extensively ponders the extravaganza of students ushering onto the college campus.

[2] This paper will interchangeably refer to Jack's use of this interpretive comprehension tactic as both plot formation and narrative construction. Plot and narrative will be used undifferentiated in this essay to refer to Jack's development of, and reliance upon story formation to create identity.

> The students greet each other with comic cries and gestures of sodden collapse. Their summer has been bloated with criminal pleasures, as always. The parents stand sun- dazed near their automobiles, seeing images of themselves in every direction. (DeLillo 4)

Jack's immediate formation of a narrative for the arriving college students and their families depicts one of the many ways in which storytelling is used by the character to understand the people around him. Jack forms a story of those he does not know in order to understand them through the generic and assumptive plot that he has created for them. Regardless of the accuracy of this created tale, it stands as Jacks only initial way to decipher, distinguish, and interpret his feelings towards those arriving to the college. This shallow interpretation allows Jack to either identify himself with or distinguish himself from those he's speculating on. Not only does his plot formation allow him to create a story lens through which he understands these strangers, but it also helps him to create a story for himself in which he either aligns with these people, or stands separately from them. So, Jack's proceeding attitude develops out of a self-constructed narrative of others. This immediate plot formation also offers the reader an insight into DeLillo's thematic aims within the first chapter of the work, as the reader experiences Jack's changing interpretation of the students. What first begins as a mimetic recounting of what Jack's witnessing quickly changes to an authorial thematization of the college life when Jack says, "The students greet each other with comic cries and gestures of sodden collapse. **Their summer has been bloated with criminal pleasures, as always**" (DeLillo 3)[3]. Not only is the reader made aware of one of the author's interests, but the mid-sentence transition works to further evince Jack's reliance upon this mode of elucidation.

Tension often arises at Gladney's peaks of identity formation/reconciliation, often obscuring his final thoughts, and circulating towards death, media, and ultimately, identity itself.

[3] Emphasis here is mine.

This tension echoes the competing ideologies in Jack, as these times of identity crisis force Jack to look inside of himself to formulate a viewpoint of the current situation. The battling theories compete within Gladney to help form his reactive thoughts, but the process is often so exhaustive and challenging that Jack can't successfully finalize his own convictions, and instead gets lost in the "white noise" of this progression.

Gladney's identity foils highlight some of the immediate thematic components that DeLillo's working at in *White Noise.* Gladney's utilization of modernist grand narrative formation directly conflicts with his apparent postmodernist identity formation and mini-narrative construction. The attacking "white noise" of society affects Jack's narrative capabilities, either by shifting his story of others, or society, or even by changing his internal narration. These conditions constrained on him by the society surrounding him result in internal conflict as the two surface interchangeably within the character.

For example, Jack's treatment of the heterogeneous culture and world that surround him is depicted through his constant construction of mini-narratives.[4] With each new encounter in the novel there is usually a mini-narrative to accompany it, but the usage of the narratives often varies with the nature of the encounter within the novel's paradigms. The second chapter of the novel opens with Jack meditating on the physical stature of his wife, Babette. What initially reads as an explicative mini-narrative of his wife's hair becomes a grand narrative about women sharing her physical attributes when DeLillo writes, "Ample women do not plan such things. They lack the guile for conspiracies of the body" (DeLillo 5). The narratives often originate as

[4] Here, mini-narratives act as opposition to "grand narratives." Grand narratives are often associated with Modernism. Mini-narratives, on the other hand, are commonly favored in Postmodernism, especially within the writings of Jean François Lyotard. Lyotard believed that the incorporation of grand narratives often resulted in "objective truths" which Lyotard argued heavily against in such a heterogeneous society. In this sense, Jack often floats between Modernist and Postmodernist narrative construction, though always reading as differentiated from Murray's consistent reliance upon Postmodernist "theories." Jack and his narrative's then become a singular evidential of the struggle to define, differentiate, and incorporate the two theories against each other.

Jack's attempts to decipher meaning within his singular interactions; however, they will sometimes transition to grand narratives spoken with Jack's assumptive applicability towards a larger whole. Even without viewing the novel through the (Post) Modern/Identity lenses that have been supplied here, this instance highlights DeLillo's thematization of Jack Gladney as a character who cannot reconcile the combatting outlooks, let alone form a solid, unchanging identity in light of them.

Jack's attempt to describe the messiness of Babette's hair immediately transitions to a reflection of how the societal perception of her haircut would change alongside her weight. Jack identifies this as an unintentional result of Babette, but pushes it further to identify it as a "conspiracy of the body" that "ample" women are incapable of. Jack's odd treatment of "The Other"[5] in this scene illuminates the confused result of his efforts to position his mini-narratives against a grand backdrop. Jack's comments come across as crude and unfounded, and Jack doesn't work any further to provide justification for this statement. In fact, Jack actually reverts back to analyzing Babette as a singular identity just a little further down the page. Gladney then traces her carelessness not to her weight, but instead to the "careless dignity of someone too preoccupied with serious matters to know or care what she looks like" (DeLillo 6). Jack is unable to formulate a cohesive story about his wife on the page, and instead seamlessly transitions from one narrative mode to another, offering multiple, jumbled explanations. His attempts each time are lost in the mutation of his identity between modernist and postmodernist storytelling strategies.

[5] Lyotard makes an important distinction in his book *Le Differend: Phrases in Dispute* between two types of ideas: those that can be said, and those that cannot (the Other). "As a general rule, an object which is thought under the category of the whole (or of the absolute) is not an object of cognition (whose reality could be subjected to a protocol, etc." (Lyotard 5). Thus, one must work to say that which cannot be said, something that Jack struggles with in the novel, which I will later discuss in relation to his identity failures.

The tension of the clashing ideologies within Jack's narrative formation prevent him from successfully creating a grand narrative for Babette, even when he begins by drafting a mini-narrative, instead coming across as assumptive and unfair. His last effort, resorting to a mini-narrative of her "careless" character, is the only way in which Jack can successfully and coherently identify the reason for her appearance. Jack's longing for a "whole truth"[6] is left un-satiated as he becomes lost in the infrastructure of his recounting. Jack is forced to reactively rescale his narrative arc construction as he fails to make it applicable to a larger whole.

Jack is not alone in this, as Murray often propagates the application of these crude misogynistic narratives. As Jack and Murray discuss his arrival to the city of Blacksmith, Murray expands upon his reason for moving and specifically aligns it with the sexuality of cities. Murray digresses by recounting a specific situation with a woman in Detroit. His attempt to decipher and depict his strained encounters with the opposite sex come out in a similarly fumbled and antithetical exposition. Murray deduces that he "loves women," stating to Jack,

> "I fall apart at the sight of long legs, striding, briskly, as a breeze carries up from the river, on a weekday, in the play of morning light. The second irony is that it's not the bodies of women that I ultimately crave but their minds. The mind of a woman. (DeLillo 11)

Murray unwaveringly transitions between attributing his love of women from their bodies and to their minds. In the same way that Jack struggles to apply his mini-narrative of Babette to a larger whole, Murray fails to definitively narrate an answer for himself. While Murray is delegated the postmodern theorist of the novel, by Wilcox, his way of articulating himself and his thoughts often strongly resemble Jack. The explicit mention of a "breeze" carrying up from the river reads

[6] This phrase is used to reference Brian McHale's *The Cambridge Introduction to Postmodernism* in which he writes, "Obligation, difficulty, wholeness, these are all modernist values, much more than they are postmodernist ones. Pleasure instead of obligation, accessibility instead of difficulty, plurality instead of wholeness: these are the postmodernist alternatives, in the view of someone like Jencks" (McHale 31).

almost identically to the "winds" described on page four in which Jack recalls creating the Department of Hitler Studies. But the narrative "breeze" and the inability to stick to one exposition are not the only similarities between the two monologues. In fact, Murray is also unable to provide a definitive statement towards his encounters with women, stating, "What fun it is to talk to an intelligent woman wearing stockings as she crosses her legs" (DeLillo 11).

Murray's final thoughts on the subject read as scattered as Jack's, though in a slightly different way. Jack's reliance on narrative formation fails as he attempts to transition from a postmodern mini-narrative towards a modernist grand narrative, failing to overcome the heterogeneity of his surrounding society in his efforts to unify it. Murray, the theorist of postmodernism, relies heavily upon his theories to draft explanations for the events and people surrounding him. These theories are developed specifically to account for the Other. Considering Jack's narratives fail to overcome, and account for, The Other, it only stands to reason that Murray's designed inclusion of Otherness would lead him to a successful identity construction. And yet, this directly opposes his reliance upon narratives, the same narratives from which he then carves out his theories. The result is a jumbled mess of stories attempting to utilize and justify two contradictory ideologies concurrently, but ultimately failing both Jack *and* Murray.

Jack also encounters story formation struggles, perhaps even more so, internally as he weaves endlessly between a "creation" of himself and a "discovered" identity which often results in moments of translucent identity representing both qualities of Jack in a muddled and confused way. In the first chapter of *White Noise*, we find Jack's expository internal monologue attempting to create an origin story for himself. Whether this is done for the benefit of the reader, or Jack's is unclear, but following the logic of the plot formation of the novel, it only seems fair

to prescribe it as both.[7] Jack tells of himself, "I am chairman of the department of Hitler studies at the College-on-the- Hill. I invented Hitler studies in North America in March of 1968. It was a cold bright day with intermittent winds out of the east" (DeLillo 4). Jack's "creation" of his identity offers an insight into storytelling as a means to identity. This can be especially felt in the last descriptive line, in which he discusses the "winds out of the east." This line echoes that of Murray's "breeze," and helps to create an odd connection between two characters that *should* stand in opposition to each other, even if only in ideological processing. Further, this line signifies the importance Jack attributes to narration, even in a nonfictional narrative's constructed setting. The description of the environment also lends insight into Jack's outlook on external narratives besides his own. Jack relies on supplemented life narratives, or stereotypical configurations, to an incredulous degree, such as in the scene where he's trying to describe Babette's hair, or when reassuring her that they will not be affected by the toxic gas, rationalizing, "I'm a college professor […] We live in a neat and pleasant town near a college with a quaint name. These things don't happen in places like Blacksmith" (DeLillo 114). His reliance upon narratives is so intense that he truly believes the narrative of his "quaint" landscape cannot be permeated by the "reality" of the toxic airborne event.

[7] A core question at the center of the novel is the intentionality of plots. Jack defines plots as moving "deathward" at all times early on in the novel. Murray; however, argues that plots instead are a necessary component of life, and that plot formation is crucial to identity development in life. As defined by Jack, the plot arc of the novel he exists in follows the aforementioned "deathward" movement. The entirety of the first segment, entitled "Waves and Radiation" follows the daily ins and outs of Jack's life. There is little to no plot structure in the first section, but once segment two opens the novel rapidly and inexplicably moves towards infidelity, paranoia, death, and ultimately, a plot. This moment also calls the reader's mind to the thematic intention of DeLillo's composition of Jack as a contradictory and chaotic character struggling to not only form a chronology, but also a *plot* for his life that will offer him a sequential and consequential identity. Meanwhile, the synthetic components of DeLillo's Gladney further explore the struggle, value, and consequences of formulating narratives, both on a personal and a societal level, and the collapse of identity in light of the ever-changing nature of these formulations.

Gladney either drafts a new “story” alongside each experience in the novel or revises a previous narrative he’d already set in place. Each revision is adapted to account for newly acquired pieces of information and theory, or as reactive human emotion felt by Jack to each contextual stimulus. In Leonard Wilcox's article, he examines Gladney through the lens of Baudrillard’s postmodernism. Not only does Wilcox highlight Gladney as a “modernist displaced in a postmodern world,” but he identifies this displacement as a resulting cause when “an older modernist order - with its dialectic of alienation and inner authenticity - is eclipsed by new forms of experiencing the self” (Wilcox 347, 348).

Gladney’s modernist reliance on narrations within the novel is often permeated by postmodernist “epiphanies.” The epiphany is usually associated with modernist literature; however, in the case of *White Noise*, Jack’s often come in the form of a modernist “Epiphany” relating to the sudden realization, or acknowledgement of the hostile postmodernist culture surrounding him. These realizations act also as an acknowledgement of the permeating capabilities of this same culture, and often times, this directly relates back to Jack’s acknowledgement of the culture’s influences upon both his identity formation, and the narratives he so heavily relies on. While I don’t entirely agree with Wilcox’s reading of Jack as a displaced modernist, the “alienation and inner authenticity” of Jack’s modernist internality is often “eclipsed” in the novel by Jack’s Other postmodernist internality rising to the surface and finding receptive roots in the surrounding postmodern society (Wilcox 347).

These same narratives signify Jack's attempts to assemble and define the significance of the individual against the "whole." Thus, the mini-narratives constructed throughout the novel come to represent a developing postmodern-identity characteristic of Jack Gladney's mutating modernist personality. In this way, Jack becomes another binary notation in the novel's world of

systematic binaries. Lyotard refers to this phenomenon in his book *The Differend: Phrases in Dispute* stating,

> As distinguished from a litigation, a differend would be a case of conflict, between (at least) two parties, that cannot be equitably resolved for lack of a rule of judgement applicable to both arguments. One side's legitimacy does not imply the other's lack of legitimacy. However, applying a single rule of judgement to both in order to settle their differend as though it were merely a litigation would wrong (at least) one of them (and both of them if neither side admits this rule) (Lyotard xii).

Murray and Jack stand in opposition. There's tension, but why? They're presumably best friends, and they constantly talk to each other about their private issues, and yet there is a tension between them on the page. They also seem to be at odds with the surrounding society, but how can this be? If one stands firmly rooted in modernist thought, and the other in postmodernist theory, then doesn't it logically follow that their clashing should ultimately, and definitively, lead to a "winner" in the sense of coherent identity formation and exposition? If it can't be this plainly approached, then wouldn't it at least stand to reason that, if one is right, one would more easily transmit throughout the postmodern society? And yet, neither of them does. Murray makes claims about postmodern theory, but always distinguishes himself from it with an implied superiority. Murray relies on narrative throughout the book, especially when attempting to explain his theories. Jack, as entirely modernist, would have a nearly impossible time of narrating himself through the postmodern world, and yet he's able to by *actively constructing* his character/identity.

Lyotard discussed this phenomenon in *The Postmodern Condition: A Report on Knowledge* when he explained that scientific discourse cannot prove itself legitimate without relying upon narratives to contextualize itself. This has been done in the past, and Lyotard explains it through viewing the Renaissance as a scientific discourse that legitimized itself by

titling the movement 'progress' for the betterment of the human race. And thus, Jack and Murray stand in ideological opposition, but happen to share many identity forming traits and believe their own viewpoints to contain some mysterious answer to an unknown question their dialogue implies that they have about society.

The conflict is of two parties whose ideas can't be resolved, because upon enacting their ideas of life they remove the applicability of the opponent's viewpoint. Both are legitimate in their own right, but they are incommensurable. Thus, a rule can't be established for both, because the enactment of a rule would be unfair to one, or both parties. Jack and Murray enter into the "endless conflict" of trying to simultaneously realize clashing ideologies around a fundamental difference. This can be seen in Jack's struggles to coherently form an identity of himself or others, and in Murray's description himself and the tenants in his building.

Murray uses narrative to describe each of these characterized tenants to Jack. He understands one man as having a past while another woman does not, and highlights this as the defining feature of their "character" as if they were actually characters on a sitcom. Similarly, he discusses, "A man with a haunted look. A man who never comes out of his room" (DeLillo 10). Murray's constant discussion of theory is contradicted here by his reliance upon narrative to make sense of something to someone else. Even more shocking is his description of himself when Jack asks which one he is. Murray answers, "I'm the Jew. What else would I be?" (DeLillo 10). Murray's answer highlights his own use of character creation through narrative in order to understand himself.

The hairstyle scene between Jack and Babette is not exclusive in its depiction of Jack's botched attempts at narrative; these fumbles become a trademark of his character throughout the novel. Even the actual construction of Jack's own character is fumbled: Gladney is the professor

of a field that doesn't actually exist. The Hitler studies department was created by Jack, and he sits as the head of the department. These may not be such fascinating facts considering the sometimes ludicrous, or anti-mimetic world-rules of *White Noise*, but they are key when it comes to interpreting the character of Jack. Jack is a serious man in the novel, but perhaps nothing sums this up better than his construction of a fake "persona" that he crafts himself into, changing his name from Jack to the acronym "J.A.K." This construction of character resonates immensely with Jack as he begins to wear heavy, all black sunglasses to appear more serious to his students. Based on the advice given to him by his chancellor in 1968, Jack gains a significant amount of weight to pair with his dark glasses and ominous name. He does all of this based on the chancellor's warning "against what he called my tendency to make a feeble presentation of self" (DeLillo 17).

The "presentation of self" displayed by Gladney throughout the novel plays a large part in his development. Jack treats his synthetic self as his real identity throughout the novel, possibly a symptom of subjecting his self to endlessly interchanging presentations of himself. Simultaneously, this thematic construction of J.A.K. works to call attention to the synthetic components within DeLillo's *White Noise*: such as what he might be attempting to say about what it means to create a narrative, or to construct a narrative of identity. Even further, DeLillo's synthetic hand here seems to be tackling what it means to attempt to discover one's identity in a society where storytelling and character construction have become directly intertwined with that realization. Fumbling for any directional narrative in his immediate vicinity, there are many moments of extreme vulnerability surfacing in Jack, even offering moments of meta-acknowledgement. Jack says at the end of chapter four, "I am the false character that follows the name around" (DeLillo 17). The underlying disapproval, or dissatisfaction in the line echoes the

inherent tension of Gladney's internal construction. His subconscious need for an "epiphany of identity" is left unsatisfied by his choice to resort to character creation. No matter how often, or how well Jack "presents" himself, he can't escape the feeling of displacement caused by this anti-mimetic self. His own vulnerability leaves Jack perceptible to permeating narratives that flourish all around him. Jack takes the chancellor's advice, notwithstanding the addition of a few minor details, so seriously that he unhealthily packs on weight to maintain a subjectively proposed ideal, and universal "identity." The advice signifies the effects of exaggerative narrative's influence upon Jack's actions in reality and reveal his resolve to avoid states of vulnerability. It simultaneously recalls the synthetic construction of DeLillo's sequencing of these events. The reader is granted this knowledge long after it has already happened, at a point in which Jack has already spent many years being J.A.K. Thus, this after-the-fact revelation serves to thematically expose the influence that narrative has upon identity *formation.*

The ridiculous outcome of J.A.K.'s formation offers insight into DeLillo's thematic focus on the rising conflicts of trying to construct a universally appealing narrative of oneself in a culture so intensely heterogeneous. How can one take advice offered by someone else who is, presumably, simultaneously creating a narrative of who they are, and who they'd want to be in that same conversation? Take, for instance, Jack in the context of the College-on-the-Hill. His entire profession has become an accessory to the persona that J.A.K maintains amongst his colleagues, and yet he doesn't speak German. Not only does Jack not speak German, but he's put exhaustive effort into keeping that fact a secret, perhaps enough effort to have successfully learned German by now. Jack points out that no student can major in the Hitler studies department at the college without a minimum of one year spent studying German. He confronts himself saying, "I was living, in short, on the edge of a landscape of vast shame" (DeLillo 31).

So, what does this synthetic aspect of Jack tell us about DeLillo's intentions in creating Jack with such an intense fear of being "found out?" The constant, adaptive construction of oneself in light of each new "Other" leads to a jumbled identity in which one is constantly contrasting the individual against the masses, and the figure against the discourse. The use of "shame" in Jack's self-confrontation implies a larger issue than simply not knowing the Germanic tongue, while the "vastness" implies a dilemma which extends to all facets of Jack's life: an inherent problem with the character's relation to the construction of the culture more so than an error in Jack's own construction. No matter his adaptive capabilities, Jack feels isolated from the things around him. His reactions as the person he thinks himself to be, or even as the person he creates himself to be, are awkward and chaotic. His attempts to connect with the world around him in a legitimate or sincere way fail him. Most notably, they fail him regardless of his adaptive determination.

This implies that the problem doesn't actually reside inside of Jack, but perhaps that the problem is a cultural one. The problem which inherently prevents Jack from connecting with the society around him is the society's emphasis on a universality that begins to eclipse and bar individual connection. Rather than working to connect the individual to this hyperreal consumerist marketing, it only ever makes Jack feel more isolated. Gladney's failed attempts at connecting with the advertising meant to appeal to him make him feel distanced from those that succeed in connecting to "their" ads. He feels cut off from those who seem content unquestionably buying into the consumerist "promise" to acquire a product equivalent to happiness. These feelings surface in Jack throughout the novel, and work to display the problematics of applying a "universal 3rd man" style of advertising to such a heterogeneous

culture.[8] The individualization of advertising breaks from the metanarrative of the universal third buyer, instead attempting to replace it with infinite mini-narratives of universally acceptable consumers. This design structured around appealing to "the Other" in turn creates a system of exclusion through its deliberate enforcement of individualized inclusivity.

For every universal third man that the advertising effort reaches, it's missed by thousands more who can't identify themselves with, or create themselves in light of those specifically "imaged" consumers. This very construction of consumerism propagates the permeation of individual narratives by enacting yet another system of binaries within the novel. This system, however, is that of a binary regulation in which the results can be measured in a scale of [-0/1-] and works to assign numerical value to one's relative distance to, or from the specified universal third consumer. Do you drink Pepsi? If not, then you're assigned a commercial displaying Coke that will seek to reach you. If it does, and sells to you, then you're assigned further advertisements that will work off of this model in order to constantly build a credibility within the individual consumer's narrative. The consumers will slowly begin to align themselves with, or against brand names based on the narratives of the advertisements and how well they line up with their own narratives of morality, preference, and even the image of a product. The consumerist metanarrative seeks to define individual consumers as either buyers of product X, or buyers of product Y. If they can't sell you X, they'll work harder on selling you more Y. The

[8] As Jim Powell discusses in his book, the system of binary regulation in product advertisement seeks to create a scale in which consumers can be related as similar to, or different from, the "typical" American. In a culture where heterogeneity has essentially duplicated "typicality" beyond recognition, there is no "universal" model to which products can be marketed. Instead, the model is modified, or mutated, to accompany every individual image of universality. The result is diversified advertising that reaches out to subordinated societal 'types' through individually designed campaigns. These campaigns appeal to specific religious, ethnic, and social circles. Powell summarizes that, "everything is reduced to cybernetics – to a binary code that seems to represent differences but which, in reality, only perpetuates this self-regulating, binary system, which only minimizes differences as it toggles back and forth between "yes" or "no," Pepsi or Coke, Republican or Democrat" (Powell 53).

very existence of this system proposes a threat to individual narrative constructions by limiting their freedom to a system of binaries instilled to sell products, and ultimately make money off of those narratives.

Murray refers to this very phenomenon a few chapters later in the book. As Jack and his wife wander through the supermarket, they run into Murray (consistently identified with Postmodernist theory by Wilcox) who offers commentary on the rapid development of media, consumerism, death, and the mass population. Murray immediately begins to discourse with them about Tibetan beliefs on death, but the dialogue transitions quickly as he draws attention to the "mystic" aura of the modern day supermarket, "This place recharges us spiritually, it prepares us, and it's a gateway or a pathway. Look how bright. It's full of psychic data" (DeLillo 37). Murray discusses the supermarket in a spiritual sense, offering theories on its "symbols." He comments on the, "wealth of data concealed in the grid" to decipher, though he says, "Not that we would want to, not that any useful purpose would be served" (DeLillo 51, 38). Murray's implication seems to suggest that even by successfully deciphering the 'white noise' of the society around him, Jack wouldn't be able to make use of the information, but that there *is* something magical in the process. The decoding process Murray is referring to is known as semiotics, which *The Oxford English Dictionary* defines as "the science of communication studied through the interpretation of signs and symbols as they operate in various fields, esp. 'language'" ("semiotics"). Murray summarizes this point to Jack later on in the book when he instructs him, "The medium practically overflows with sacred formulas if we can remember how to respond innocently and get past our irritation, weariness, and disgust" (DeLillo 51).

Lyotard studies this phenomenon extensively in *Libidinal Economy*, tracing the search for "sacred formulas" in supermarkets alongside the time old search for God. Murray echoes

Lyotard in understanding that the object of the search is no longer a physical embodiment, such as it was with the art-center of the modernists, nor is it the spirit of God, for whom the search stopped with rising modernity. Then for what? Lyotard understands the “search” as a search for effects, or what he calls “discourse that can produce locatable, predictable and controllable metamorphoses, a search then, for discrimination” (Lyotard 45). Lyotard argues that science does not seek to study causes, but instead that it hopes to attain knowledge through recording what the *effects* of a cause are, whether than means a reaction, or a discrimination ([-0/1-]). Similarly, advertising narratives seek to study and record the effects of their campaigns in order to maximize the reactions, and trace the roots of the discriminants. Brands study consumer narratives as a scientific discourse in hopes of being able to both permeate, and mutate that narrative to their will. Lyotard believed that information not transferred into a language of computerization will not be able to survive in a postmodern society. "Information will zip around the globe at the speed of electricity, and people will try to steal it" (Powell 23). The supermarket in *White Noise* stands as an embodiment of this theory; Murray's constant attempts to supersede this information offer a glimpse into the Lyotardian dangers of digitalizing knowledge and even further, narrative. Similarly, Murray’s ‘psychic’ data zips around them in the supermarket, conjuring ideas of mystic capabilities in Gladney’s mind.

Lyotard is often criticized for praising the emotional reaction that people can have towards the image, often ignoring the capitalist tendency to exploit these images for profit, but in *Libidinal Economy* he examines this reaction as something inherently human. Similar to Murray, Lyotard relates that it is not a trait shared by one kind of "universal man," but instead offering,

> There is no sign or thought of the sign which is not about power and for power. The voyage of this search is not the drift of the mad and the plague-stricken, nor the transpatial exodus of the uncanny, it is the well-prepared flight of the explorer,

> foreshadowing that of the priest, then the soldier and the businessman, it is the Avant-garde of capital . . . (Lyotard 45)

Following the postmodern emphasis on mini-narratives and accounting for the rapid growth of technology, the permeating effects of the consumerist culture's narrative become apparent. This effect even permeates the synthetic text of DeLillo's *White Noise*, such as in the scene where Jack loses Wilder in a shopping cart. Jack's reflective monologue is broken up by Steffie repeating "Kleenex Softique" as she grabs on to his hand in what he determines is an attempt to regain himself from a moment of doubt.[9]

Shortly after the Airborne Toxic Event, the family attempts to rest after taking refuge from the disaster's aftermath. Gladney takes note of Steffie's breathing as she sleeps, finding something odd about its pattern: she's muttering 'Toyota Celica' in her sleep. Reflecting on this, Jack only seems to become more intrigued and attached to this phenomenon,

> It made me feel that something hovered. But how could this be? A simple brand name, an ordinary car. How could these near-nonsense words, murmured in a child's restless sleep, make me sense a meaning, a presence? She was only repeating some TV voice. Toyota Corolla, Toyota Celica, Toyota Cressida. Supranational names, computer-generated, more or less universally pronounceable…Whatever its source, the utterance struck me with the impact of a moment of splendid transcendence. (DeLillo 155)

In this moment, Jack is able to "respond innocently" to the cultural material as it escapes from his sleeping daughter's mouth. His careful examination of this momentary and subconscious

[9] There is no on-page explanation provided as to why Steffie is mumbling this product name, or even confirmation that it *is* Steffie speaking, but the segment is immediately followed with Jack noticing Steffie's attentiveness towards his mood. He credits her suddenly tight grip to keeping him from "becoming resigned to whatever melancholy moods she thought she detected hovering about my person" (DeLillo 39). It is significant that Steffie is not only the most susceptible child to consumerist influence in the novel, but that her *presumed* mutterings here actually seem to *correlate* with the sentiment or emotion she's feeling. Even if it isn't actually Steffie speaking, the words come from within the world of the story and directly echo the Steffie's feelings. The act of grabbing Jack's hand to comfort him matches the child's understanding of tissues as a product; an understanding that she's learned through commercials of watching people *cry* into tissues. Steffie's association of the brand name's use alongside an act of outward affection depicts the influence of the consumerist culture, not only on her character, but her intelligence as well. Too advanced to be spoken, Steffie's sentiments are associated with and perhaps even *enabled by* the assistance of product placement. 'Don't cry' becomes 'Kleenex Softique.'

permeation leaves him with a feeling of transcendence, as if he's just discovered something, but can't exactly say what. In this moment, Jack has reached his closest proximity to a physical manifestation of the postmodernist society with which he is surrounded, and is able to fully witness the influential effects of the intrusive force. Jack's perceived transcendence following this moment of exposure calls back to the semiotics theories prominent in *Discours, Figure*. Baudrillard believed that images in a postmodern, consumerist market will only ever grow more abstract, only ever moving further away from their "real" counterparts. Lyotard felt differently, however, and believed in trying to create a divorce of images from the processes of societal/cultural reproduction.

The binary system of implementing a [-0/1-] advertisement scale is referred to as acting, "as a 'deterrence model,' which suppresses radical change," says Jim Powell in his book *Postmodernism for Beginners* (Powell 53). This deterrence model emptily promises freedom of choice, but actually prevents further freedoms through its reactive system of choice-elimination based on previous choices made by the individual. It is Murray who relates this concept back to death in the novel when he says, "To become a crowd is to keep out death. To break off from the crowd is to risk death as an individual, to face dying alone" (DeLillo 73). To break away from this system of binaries is to expose oneself as different from the surrounding crowds, which Murray believes to lead towards lonesome death.

II.
The Nega-Narrative

It is through the previous theorizing that the second perspective of plot formation becomes apparent: to plot is to die. Perhaps not a real, physical death, but instead the death of narrative individuality. The overwhelming heterogeneity of society drowns out the

heterogeneous qualities of the individual within that society. It's still possible to be an individual, but Murray promises that it leads to an "individually" lonely death.

Individuals can hide in crowds, finding comfort in not having to identify themselves as an individual. This is especially true if they don't happen to have an idea of who exactly that individual is, or even the ability to *create a story* of who that person is. Jack is aware of this appeal as he says, "Hitler gave me something to grow into and develop toward, tentative as I have sometimes been in the effort" (DeLillo 17). Jack realizes that Hitler's Nazi Germany is huge, and that he can successfully hide behind it as he internally struggles with his own identity formation. Rather than having to solidify a definitive version of himself as "the individual," Jack is able to hide himself within the vastness of the studies, even within the small field that Jack "created". Hitler is significant here not only as a member of history that tried to *rewrite* the historical narrative, but also as a name so powerfully large that it eclipses Jack's.[10] This process of hiding directly correlates with the tension of the vast shame that Jack feels so close to. In the grocery store Murray says to Babette, "In cities no one notices specific dying. Dying is a quality of the air. It's everywhere and nowhere," signaling the "freedom" offered by becoming a face in the crowd (DeLillo 38). Murray's line directly contradicts his previous notion that one cannot live without plot formation, showcasing the identity struggles that Murray shares with Jack.

The decision to hide in the masses rather than stand apart from them echoes the trail of death associated alongside consumerism found throughout the novel. The growing speed of

[10] Rewrite is used here in reference to the burning of "un-German" literature committed by members of the Nazi party in attempts to erase or alter cultural narratives other than their own. Similarly, Hitler's name carries such a dominatingly dreadful connotation that Jack becomes irrelevant. Rather than being Jack Gladney, a professor who specializes in Nazism (a title referring to specific qualities/interests of Jack), Jack imagines himself instead as, "chairman of the department of Hitler studies at the College-on-the- Hill," (allowing himself to become a shadowed avatar obfuscated behind Hitler's name) (DeLillo 4).

technology combined with the binary narratives of consumerism work to permeate the individual's identity formation even further by buttressing lust and fear. Technology within *White Noise* is often depicted as a medium of illustrating death, which plays a large part in Jack's distrust of technology's progression, such as when he reflects, "If our complaints have a focal point, it would have to be the TV set, where the outer torment lurks, causing fears and secret desires" (DeLillo 85).

In this reflection, Jack seems to note the binary nature of death in the media; if death is displayed in variant form X on a television set, the viewer is naturally going to identify themselves as wanting an X death (burning to death) over a Y death (fatal stabbing), or vice-versa. One will immediately seek to compare and contrast the envisioned death narratives (what I will call "nega-narratives") against the spectacularized television death. Even if a viewer isn't necessarily *sold* on a certain death, or even death as a concept, they will almost certainly encounter various images/modes of death within news footage and reports, ads, and nightly entertainment that force an encounter with or creation of a uniquely individual *nega-narrative*, or the envisioned narrative arc of their eventual death (including the obvious when, why, where, and how), but even further, *their presence after death.*

In his essay, "The Disnarrated" Gerald Prince discusses the idea of the disnarrated as, "all the events that *do not* happen but, nonetheless, are referred to (in a negative or hypothetical mode) by the narrative text" (Prince). This echoes the power of death in the pages of *White Noise*, as Prince continues to define the disnarrated as, "terms, phrases, and passages that consider what did not or does take place, whether they pertain to the narrator and his or her narration, or to one of the characters and his or her actions" (Prince). While death isn't ever

actually realized amongst the characters, it is nonetheless a central part of their experiences, their thoughts, and their developing identities.[11]

Jack and Babette both fear death, and it comes to define them in an uncannily strong way. They begin to have arguments about who will die first and who will suffer more after losing the other. Jack begins to notice death everywhere around him, grows paranoid at the meaning of this, and begins to obsess over it. Babette becomes so desperate to live without the fear of death that she cheats on Jack to acquire supposed fear-removing pills. Jack is sold death through the readings on the SIMUVAC and yet, he himself sells death so well that he's able to attain a job as the Head of Hitler Studies without even speaking German.

This comparative view of death offers the largest plot point in the novel, and it does so by creating a conflict between Jack and Babette. The couple constantly focus on death, and happy moments often result in their insecurities of solitude. Ultimately, they fear death, but there is a strange, almost hostile, attitude towards the idea of having to live in the absence of the other. Early in the novel Jack morbidly thinks to himself, "Who will die first?" (DeLillo 30). The question doesn't ever recede, but instead continuously manifests through character's desperate

[11] While Prince's theory of the disnarrated would certainly be able to represent nega-narratives, Prince argues that the disnarrated, like the unnarrated and unnarratable, is not essential to a narrative arc (Prince). I'm interested in arguing against this in specific cases, or perhaps that the nega-narrative may not always be contained as a subset of the disnarrated. For instance, I would argue that the nega-narrative is essential in certain tales, such as in the fourth stave (third spirit) of Charle's Dickens' *A Christmas Carol.* Scrooge's life becomes determined by the nega-narrative that the third spirit forces upon him (a visit to his grave as robbers prepare to steal his beloved possessions). What's more is that Scrooge isn't held fondly by anyone, save for those that are freed from debt by his passing. This has such an effect on Scrooge that he wakes up on Christmas morning a changed man. His life becomes defined by a narrative of his death and while it isn't set in stone (no pun intended), it is a constant thought/motivation during his life. Thus, the nega-narrative becomes essential to the tale of Scrooge's transformation, even though it has no place once he's changed his ways. Death plays a similarly defining role in *White Noise* through the form of "death constructs." Jack and Babette's fears of who will die first are a primary example, but this can also be seen in Jack's understanding of Hitler's death count as something so large and *tangible* that he's actually able to hide his identity behind it. So, even as the disnarrated falls into the category of non-essential, the nega-narrative in *White Noise* is an essential piece of character/identity development as it acts as an intrusive narrative form, similar to the role of technology and the postmodern Other throughout the work.

actions in the novel. Later in the novel, Jack addresses this question again, but delves further into the power of speculating on death to explore its functionality,

> When I read obituaries I always note the age of the deceased. Automatically I relate this figure to my own age. Four years to go, I think. Nine more years. Two years and I'm dead. The power of numbers is never more evident than when we use them to speculate on the time of our dying. (DeLillo 99)

Following the same ideology of the "deterrence model," death is sold to every consumer of commodities, naturally creating a systematic order of [-0/1-] binaries, even within individual nega-narratives. Murray summarizes this thought into a theory which he later recites to Jack, "This is the whole point of technology. It creates an appetite for immortality on the one hand. It threatens universal extinction on the other. Technology is lust removed from nature" (DeLillo 285). DeLillo speaks of this topic in his essay "Silhouette City: Hitler, Manson and the Millennium," writing that technology acts as a way of softening forbidden and threatening topics such that they can be streamed to television sets all across America, and that viewers can confront these issues while feeling safe in their homes. This incessant exposure to death allows a viewer to reflect on their nega-narrative fantasies without the tragic finality of the corporeal experience. Even further, the media allows for a continuous stream of new images of death that demand the viewer amend their nega-narrative. The television offers a hyperreal space in which the darkest parts of our composition can not only be confronted securely, but marketed and sold for entertainment. In "Silhouette City," DeLillo examines this treatment of death in media through popular commercials writing,

> Racial hostility is a frequent subtext of commercials for beer, soft drinks and running shoes. In these 20-second sociodramas, danger appears in the form of angry-looking blacks, who are then instantly reconstituted as happy Pepsi drinkers. We try to obscure threats and disruptions by tailoring them to a format of consumer appeal. (Silhouette City)

Life is tailored for consumerism, but so is death. The nega-narratives of others' are stripped from that context and placed against a backdrop of various media. The plight of the Jews in the Holocaust is placed into Holocaust films, tickets are sold to moviegoers, and an evening is spent watching the Third Reich before heading home for dinner. The consumers in turn then take this simulacrum of genocide and avoids the realization of it in their lives; they shape their lives around avoiding that manner of death and in turn define their lives around the plot of someone else's death. These simulated horrors are sold to consumers as "educational" entertainment; they offer a way to add a "figure" to the discourse of the Second World War. Knowing that these attempts will never successfully "capture" the reality of these events, they are endlessly perpetuated and reproduced in attempts to narrate the devastating image of the Holocaust. Bee grasps onto this concept during the Airborne Toxic event as she says to Jack,

> ‘Where's the media?' She said.
> ‘There is no media in Iron City.'
> 'They went through all that for nothing?' (DeLillo 92)

Bee's shock at the lack of media depicting the horrendous event implies that her understanding of events, such as the billowing smoke cloud in front of her, stems entirely from the television news coverage relayed after-the-fact. Without a camera crew present to record the horrific events, Bee believes that they will be forgotten, or that they don't mean anything. The media's propagation of terror/information has become Bee's understanding of significance in the overflow of the hyperreality. As with the Holocaust, Bee believes that recording the event will offer new ways to understand, or redeem the atrocity.

The film depictions of the Holocaust simulate reality to create entertainment in which tragedies can be faced head-on from a safe distance; however, the SIMUVAC in Chapter 10 seeks to study reality to build a better simulated reality preparation. SIMUVAC becomes the

dominant reality. This change in dominance sits uneasy with Jack, and he finds himself afraid of the simulated information residing within the SIMUVAC computers. His fears only grow after realizing that the information contained within the simulation program is "real" enough that Jack has been placed on a medical watch list. Ironically, the system doesn't pull up "Jack Gladney," but instead pulls up the name "J.A.K." (DeLillo 141). Even more discomforting to Jack is the actual process of accepting such devastating news from someone wearing an armband that promises it's not real. This is important as it signifies the postmodern integration of the "image" of Jack Gladney. The SIMUVAC employee summarizes to Jack,

> It's what we call a massive data-base tally. Gladney, J.A.K. I punch in the name, the substance, the exposure time and then I tap into your computer history. Your genetics, your personals, your medicals, your psychologicals, your police-and-hospitals. It comes back pulsing stars. This doesn't mean anything is going to happen to you as such, at least not today or tomorrow. It just means you are the sum total of your data. No man escapes that. (DeLillo 141)

This information startles Jack, and the rest of the novel develops a "plot" (narrative arc) upon his discovery of such threatening data. This apprehension stands in direct opposition to the comfort that Jack feels upon seeing his identity confirmed on the ATM screen in Chapter 10. Jack describes this,

> The figure on the screen roughly corresponded to my independent estimate, feebly arrived at after long searches through documents, tormented arithmetic. Waves of relief and gratitude flowed over me. The system had blessed my life. I felt its support and approval [. . .] The system was invisible, which made it all the more impressive, all the more disquieting to deal with. But we were in accord, at least for now. The networks, the circuits, the streams, the harmonies. (DeLillo 46)

Jack is initially comforted by the hyperreality's confirmation of who he coherently identifies himself as, the "Jack Gladney" of Blacksmith. The later revelation of distrust comes only upon hearing himself confirmed as a sum of his total parts, specifically named "J.A.K. Gladney" of Blacksmith. Jack's apprehension to the systemic data threatening his reality takes form through

an immediate, and overactive fear of death. Jack cannot picture death, or even create a chronicle of what death will bring. Unable to cohere his life with the Otherness of death, Jack becomes increasingly afraid of letting his life story be defined by his nega-narrative.

The mechanization of society creates harmony in Jack when the identities align, but when the system is able to compensate for and include the Other where Jack cannot, he feels personally threatened. Once again, the hyperreality poses a change to *his* narrative. The heterogeneity of the society that attacks the individual narrative formation, and challenges self-discovery of identity is propagated even further by the propulsion of tech systems; systems that are able to easily manage consistent inclusion of Otherness where humans cannot. The postmodern society surrounding Jack is designed for this inclusion, and Murray's theories constantly work to address this "Other" too. Jack works to incorporate this inclusion into his own identity, such as in the scene of Babette's hair, but his attempts lead to ridiculous, unfair assumptions about The Other. Each failed attempt builds tension in Jack's character, which is epitomized upon the discovery of the system's ability to include his Other when he cannot. Jack is eclipsed by this new form of experiencing the self in the hyperreality.

III.
Sorting, Telling, & Keeping

In a 1988 interview with *Rolling Stone*, Don DeLillo writes about the "motif" of contemporary violence saying, "I see contemporary violence as a kind of sardonic response to the promise of consumer fulfillment in America" (DeCurtis). DeLillo's words offer prospect into contemporary American violence as a reaction to the feeling of displacement created by trying to market products towards a "universal third man" in a society in which the heterogeneity of the culture itself prevents the realization of a universal identity. The instillation of such paradigms

upon the individual creates a series of events in which that same individual is then acting in defiance of, or adherence to, the external paradigms of X and Y placed upon them.

The entire system promises help, but instead only furthers feelings of displacement in consumer narratives. Take, for instance, the scene of the Gladney family going to the mall. Jack runs into a coworker who comments on how approachable Gladney is outside of work. This attention shifts something inside of Jack, and soon he is ready to go on a pre-Christmas shopping spree with his family. The Gladney's spend a lot of money and leave the mall in high spirits, but when they return home everyone goes their own way in silence. It is this same system of binary assignation that most prominently permeates the construction of identity within the novel.

For instance, Jack, driving Heinrich to school, notices a crossing guard directing traffic in the rain. He immediately transitions the individual to a larger backdrop, identifying her as an actress in a soup commercial. DeLillo writes,

> A woman in a yellow slicker held up traffic to let some children cross. I pictured her in a soup commercial taking off her oilskin hat as she entered the cheerful kitchen where her husband stood over a pot of smoky lobster bisque, a smallish man with six weeks to live. (DeLillo 22)

The mini-narrative of the crossing guard is constructed as a simulacrum of the average American soup commercial. For instance, take the sudden transition from Jack's narration of her individualized physical description against his contrasting perception of her as a replica of an actress in a commercial, cast alongside a sick man with no discernible description. This scenario further models the pervading consumerist "white noise" breaching into Jack's own narrative formation. Jack's narrative takes a sudden dark tone at the description of the "smallish man" in the commercial, perhaps signifying his acknowledgement of the somewhat ludicrous comparison he's found himself making. The implied lingering "death" at the end of the description not only acts as its own nega-narrative, but also offers an immediate example of the violent tension

created when these external advertising narratives preface Jack's own internal processing. It also highlights the repetitive death thematic being delivered to Gladney (and presumably all other consumers), and stands as a possible explanation for why Murray, constantly spurting theories about his postmodern society, understands narrative arcs, or plots, to always cycle back towards death: that's what has been illustrated through the marketing campaigns of his time.

Jack's reaction to the crossing guard echoes Lyotard's thoughts on the divorce of the image from the reproduction. The "smallish man" image may be preposterous, but it depicts an honest human emotion that strongly resembles the loneliness that the Gladney family feels immediately after their mall splurge. The loneliness isn't exclusive to the "broken promise" of consumerism, but instead extends to all aspects of the society (and interactions with it) surrounding the Gladneys.

Gladney struggles to align, even counteract, this fear within himself, but is easily able to identify it in Babette. Critiquing her fear of death Gladney says, "It isn't that she doesn't cherish life; it's being left alone that frightens her. The emptiness, the sense of cosmic darkness. MasterCard, Visa, American Express" (DeLillo 100). The "cosmic darkness" that Babette fears is shared by Jack, though as he spends the second half of the novel desperately attempting to rid himself of it. This pursuit resembles that of Babette's attempts to gain Dylar, a pill that supposedly removes the fear of death, through any means necessary, including sleeping with its creator, "Mr. Gray."

Upon discussing this infidelity, Babette attempts to remove any form of humanity narrative from the discussion with Jack. Her language changes from their normal dialogue to scientific discourse. Unable to find a "story" that justifies her interaction with Mr. Gray, Babette turns to cold, scientific language stating, "I did what I had to do. I was remote. I was operating

outside myself. It was a capitalist transaction" (DeLillo 194). In this statement, the effects of the permeating consumerist narrative come full circle. The operation of being "outside" of oneself offers insight into the changing narrative ability of the capitalist society. Infidelity doesn't align with the "story" of Babette's identity, so she had to operate outside of herself; Babette is admitting to an adaptively changing character construction in light of what she deems a crucial capitalist transaction. Even more interesting is that Babette seems to understand these same transactions as having no inherent narratives themselves. Her rationale seems to attribute narrative to identity, but also seems to understand business arrangements as existent outside of individualized identity. Instead, it is a negotiation between two much larger entities; it is a deal between universals. In the vein of the shopping spree, this trade needs no more justification than being part of a universal consumer-supplier relations prerogative. It is through this simplified justification that the identity of the equation is removed, leaving only a sum of an unidentified transaction. Babette is stuck between being faithful to Jack in constant fear of death, or purchasing an "alternate" construction in which she doesn't fear death, but must *adapt* who she tells herself she is and what she's capable of: namely, cheating on Jack.

Jack is unable to accept the identityless and scientific language proposed by his wife. He feels as if he's being deceived by the details of the story, and ultimately spends the conversation seeking minute details of Mr. Gray in order to flesh out the mental image of his character and role in the building narrative. Jack's attempts to humanize Mr. Gray are undercut by Babette; she refuses to indulge his need for a justifying narrative of the events. Babette says to Jack, "It's better if you know him as Mr. Gray. That's all. He's not tall, short, young or old. He doesn't laugh or cry. It's for your own good" (DeLillo 195).

The decisive refusal of humanly details highlights Babette's intuition into not only Jack's fear of identity in the infidelity, but also his absolute *need* for a narrative of the events[12]. She seems to understand his mental processing, and attempts to change its ability to create an image it can pair with their discourse. Similar to the "universal third man," Mr. Gray becomes a million different men in Jack's mind, and Babette's scientific discourse becomes an embodiment of the permeating capabilities of the postmodern consumerist society.

Jack is struck hard by this infidelity, not simply due to it being an act of infidelity, but because it marks the first time that Babette and Jack have not shared everything with each other. Jack makes a point of mentioning this by discussing the secret nature of his previous wives, who were all somehow connected to governmental work. Babette had been Jack's first entirely honest wife, and he's shell-shocked at discovering that to no longer be true. He summarizes, "She was not a keeper of secrets, at least not until her death fears drove her into a frenzy of clandestine research and erotic deception. I thought of Mr. Gray and his pendulous member. The image was hazy, unfinished. The man was literally gray, giving off a visual buzz" (DeLillo 214).

Babette, having left out details in order to muddle with Jack's mental imaging, literally creates a *grey mass* of wonder and fear. Similar to the apprehension Jack feels to the SIMUVAC'S inclusion, he is similarly unable to accept this grey mass as his definitive answer. Mr. Gray becomes a humanized manifestation of this inclusivity that Jack cannot account for. Jack's insistent reliance upon narratives to make sense of things prevents him from letting go of his need for an image of the Dylar project manager. His need is supported even further when Vernon, Babette's father, shows up suddenly with a gun that he wishes to give to Jack. Jack,

[12] In this moment Babette seems aware of the definitive effect that external narratives have on Jack's formation of himself and proactively attempts to transfer knowledge to Jack without a story in hopes that he will receive it objectively.

unsure of the meaning of this encounter, takes the gun and by doing so, commits himself to the rapidly developing plot of the novel. Ironically, Jack *also* understands the gun as a way to propel himself forward into the plot, and against Mr. Gray,

> "It occurred to me that this was the ultimate device for determining one's competence in the world [. . .] What does it mean to a person, beyond his sense of competence and well-being and personal worth, to carry a lethal weapon, to handle it well, be ready and willing to use it? A concealed lethal weapon. It was a secret, it was a second life, a second self, a dream, a spell, a plot, a delirium." (DeLillo 254)

Jack understands the gun as an alternate life, one in which he directly composes who he is in light of who he's ready to aim a loaded weapon at. Jack's out-of-character commitment to the firearm depicts his struggle to form an identity of his relationship with Babette in light of her recent plot twist affair. It also depicts the pinnacle of Jack's frustration with the postmodernist society's oxymoronic inclusive elusiveness. Retracing the "broken promise" of society, Babette is not cured by Dylar, and instead still faces her fear of death on top of the guilt she feels for being unfaithful. Jack is now armed, without the comfort of his relationship, and seemingly ready to commit an act of violence in response to the transaction's broken promise of bravery. Worse yet is that Jack cannot create a grand narrative that eases his pain, or even explains it. The entire operation of the culture stands in opposition to his attempts to do so, and society's Lyotardian-style attacks upon character and narrative prevent Jack from connecting with others in light of a common, unified narrative through which the two can relate. This recluses Jack, and Babette's turn from honest narrative to scientific calculations only propels him into further revenge.

It isn't long after mysteriously receiving the handgun from Babette's father that Jack is on the hunt to find Mr. Gray. The gun becomes a comfort for Jack, especially after Babette's infidelity, and it enables him to fight the system that he's grown so frustrated with and so withdrawn from. After having taken the gun to school to test his comfort levels with it, an

exaggerative trial run of his new identity, Jack sets off to find Mr. Gray, whom he has now learned is named "Willie Mink."[13] The gun offers a form of enablement to Jack as it allows him the comfort to begin defying the system, and he does so immediately. After getting into an argument with Babette about the use of the car, Jack takes off out of the house to find Mink on foot. Once he steps outside, however, Jack is compelled to simply steal the neighbor's car instead. Decisively out of character, Jack steals the car and takes off towards his revenge. It doesn't stop there, though, as Jack is enabled by the firearm's newly granted identity to continue breaking laws. He runs a red light, intentionally declines to yield on the expressway ramp, and refuses to pay the quarter toll, instead driving straight through. Jack reflects that,

> This must be how people escape the pull of the earth, the gravitational leaf-flutter that brings us hourly closer to dying. Simply stop obeying. Steal instead of buy, shoot instead of talk. I ran two more lights on the rainy approach roads to Iron City. (DeLillo 303)

The gun isn't simply a means for Jack to commit felonious acts, but instead serves the same function as J.A.K.'s apparel: it becomes the outfit of the present identity. The situation of Jack's felonious ulterior personality itself acts as a case of a *differend*, as seen previously in regard to the heterogeneity of identity composition in both Jack and Murray. Thus, to try and apply a singular rule (lens) to both makes each inapplicable. The same can be said of the felonious Jack. The Jack that is willing to steal his neighbor's car and run red lights is not the same Jack as seen in the beginning of the novel, nor is it J.A.K. In fact, the new Jack is so different in his process of operations that he seems almost incomparable. The *Internet Encyclopedia of Philosophy* writes,

> Lyotard insists that phrase regimens are heterogeneous and incommensurable. That is, they are of radically different types and cannot be meaningfully compared through an initial presentation of the phrase event of which they are situations. However, different phrase regimens can be brought together through genres. Genres supply rules for the linking of phrases, but rather than being syntactic

[13] As Jack begins to develop tropes of an action hero, Mr. Gray begins to develop human traits.

> rules as phrase regimens are, genres direct how to concatenate through ends, goals, or stakes. (Woodward)

Thus, it seems only natural that the three Jacks stand in such opposition that they become nearly non-linkable. It is through the medium of the novel itself, and DeLillo's synthetic structuring, that the two become enabled by narrative genre, and thus become comparable in their own right. The plot structure of the novel, seemingly, builds itself around the actions that Jack takes within the pages. The ending third of the novel reads as an entirely different genre than that of the beginning of the novel. And yet, these sections communicate with each other, allowing the various Jacks to become linked. Even further, each section comes with its own set of rules and goals for Jack to either abide by or break from.[14]

DeLillo's synthetic shift towards emphasizing the genre aesthetics allows Jack to become a heroic figure in the conventional action-oriented plot of the third part of the novel. Because he has taken on a quest of vengeance, the world around him seems to melt into this new end-goal, supplying the "rules for the linking of phrases" (Woodward). Similarly, the opening third of the novel seems to have no inherent plot structure as Jack's life also has no inherent plot devices at work: he is a married professor at the College-on-the-Hill. He spends days with his children, and with Babette. Jack has purposefully crafted a life in which he believes to be so insignificant that something terrible cannot happen to him and his family. This point is explicitly counteracted in the second section of the novel, which reads like a disaster story and focuses on Jack's self-interpretation as a character/person *above* disasters: "These things don't happen in places like

[14] This is in reference to the life-cycle opening third of the novel, the Disaster movie style second section, and the action/revenge tale of the last third. The book not only shapes itself around Jack's actions, but it forms loose molds of generic storytelling genres that force Jack to confront narrative identity construction in various and uniquely challenging ways (e.g. shifting Jack from the Professor who would never face a disaster to the action hero seeking vengeance later on, and forcing him to create a narrative that can supply an identity that can explain these events.)

Blacksmith" (DeLillo 114). The thematic and synthetic irony of this statement is emphasized especially in comparison to the novel's opening chapter in which Jack watches bustling student bodies pour onto the college campus. This is exactly where the novel begins, at a moment in his life that is just as any other, creating the collusive relationship between the novel's interweaving plots and Jack's lack of one.

The simultaneous plots continue to converge toward their definite limit as Jack approaches the hotel where Willie Mink is staying. Suddenly overcome by a surge of meta-physicality, Jack is ultra-aware of his surroundings as he approaches the door,

> I continued to advance in consciousness. Things glowed, a secret life rising out of them. Water struck the roof in elongated orbs, splashing drams. I knew for the first time what rain really was. I knew what wet was. […] Great stuff everywhere, racing through the room, racing slowly. A richness, a density. I believed everything. I was a Buddhist, a Jain, a Duck River Baptist. (DeLillo 134)

Jack is immediately able to notice minute details in the world around him. The world is literally splashing with literary details. True to the novel's form, Jack's attention to the rain while arriving at the motel acts as a binary scene to Jack's previous discussion with Heinrich. As chapter six opens, Jack and Heinrich discuss the radio broadcast announcing rain. As Heinrich tells Jack that it will rain in the evening, Jack responds that it is already raining. Heinrich continues to refer to the radio's prediction of rain later on, unwilling to confirm Jack's statement that it's raining:

> "Just because it's on the radio doesn't mean we have to suspend belief in the evidence of our senses."
> "Our senses? Our senses are wrong a lot more often than they're right. This has been proved in the laboratory. Don't you know about all those theorems that say nothing is what it seems?" (DeLillo 16)

As Heinrich continues to stand un-phased against Jack's insistence, Jack refers to a situation similar to his encounter with Willie Mink. He asks Heinrich to consider a man in a trench coat holding a gun to his head and asking for his truth of the rain, no one else's. While Heinrich

ultimately disappoints Jack with a lack of an answer, the scene brings immediate ties to not only Jack's encounter with Mink, but with a segment from Lyotard's *The Postmodern Condition: A Report on Knowledge*. These scenes not only echo each other in a binary nature, but also refer once more back to the phrase regimens that Lyotard discussed. The scenes are radically different, not only in their thematic interpretation of the dialogue/events on screen, but also in their final, calculative answers. For instance, Jack insists to Heinrich that the rain is real, as he can definitively claim to sense it falling from the sky. However, in attempting to get Heinrich to admit this, Jack ultimately fails. Perhaps attributable to Heinrich's character thematics, it's worth considering it in light of DeLillo's synthetic construction. Heinrich's lack of an answer, therefore leading to an anticlimactic exchange between the two, echoes the opening segment's lack of narrative advances. Similarly, Jack's later awareness of the rain in the third segment further echoes this stalemate as Gladney refers to it as the "first time" he's ever felt rain, retroactively altering his previous discussion with Heinrich (DeLillo 16). It isn't until the narrative allows forward development that Jack is able to feel the rain, and not only is he able to feel wet, but he's suddenly aware of a sensory overload, as if he's finally granted an ability to perceive in light of the new *advancing* narrative track. While discussing the dependability of the human senses as scientific observations Lyotard writes,

> What constitutes a scientific observation? A fact that has been registered by an eye, an ear, a sense organ? Senses are deceptive, and their range and powers of discrimination are limited. This is where technology comes in. Technical devices originated as prosthetic aids for the human organs or as physiological systems whose function it is to receive data or condition the context. (Lyotard 44)

Heinrich's refusal to rely on his senses as proof of the referent ("reality") he's witnessing acts as a stand in for the Other. When pressed on the issue of "his truth" by Jack, Heinrich only replies that his truth is irrelevant, that somewhere else lies another truth that counters his.[15]

Leonard Wilcox understands Jack's entrance into the motel as a loss of coherence and identity. Wilcox writes, "But these observations of an intensified reality rapidly descend into ludicrous banality, and rather than an epiphany of identity, Gladney undergoes a farcical loss of self" (Wilcox 355). After examining the similarities between the scenes with Mink and Heinrich, it seems counterproductive to perceive Jack's awareness as *loss* of coherence. The heightened awareness seems to offer the opposite appeal, as Jack is finally able to account for the Other; it seems that Jack has finally gotten to "his" truth. This seems further confirmed by Jack's last statement, in which he explicitly discusses the Otherness of Mink, "My only sadness was Babette, having to kiss a scooped-out face" (DeLillo 135).[16]

Not only does Jack stop referring to Mink as "Mr. Gray" once he's able to compensate for his Other, but Mink himself becomes a physical representation of the Lyotardian aspects of the novel. Jack becomes aware of himself as "part of a network of structures and channels" (DeLillo 132). Jack begins to notice the technology of the world around him: "auditory scraps, tatters, whirling specks. A heightened reality. A denseness that was also a transparency" (DeLillo 133). Wilcox argues that Jack maintains his modernity in the postmodern culture around him but argues that Jack loses his identity in this encounter. Wilcox also argues that Jack's coherence *diminishes* the explicit statement from Jack, but also ignores his sudden awareness of the

[15] Even Heinrich's synthetic dialogue echoes the feeling of individual displacement in a world of universally connective narratives. Heinrich doesn't believe that his truth matters as it is already countered by another universal truth, and that to connect to a system of rational logic he must drop his truth in favor of the all-inclusive Other truth.
[16] Similarly, here it seems imprudent to chalk this statement up to Gladney's humor, as he's anything but comedic in light of discovering the affair. Instead, it seems beneficial to recognize this moment as both a thematic and synthetic awareness of the character's inability (and discomfort in this failure) to account for the Otherness of not only his society, but its breach into his personal narrative.

technologies around him, or the 'transparent denseness.' What Wilcox depicts as a 'lessening' coherence actually reads as Jack's *accountability* of heterogeneity, such as in the scene where he first shoots Mink: "I fired the gun, the weapon, the pistol, the firearm, the automatic" (DeLillo 135).[17] Paired alongside the previous conversation with Heinrich, as well as Jack's actual entrance into the motel, the encounter with Mink depicts Jack's first success at depicting the Other. Even further, Jack is able to simultaneously understand himself in relation to the Other. He has become aware of the universal multitudes, so to speak.

In his thesis, Leonard Wilcox discusses the scene between Mink and Jack as a confrontation between the modern man and the postmodern culture itself. Wilcox writes,

> But Gladney's confrontation with Mink is an allegorical confrontation with postmodern culture itself. Mink is the personification of a new order; a composite man of undecidable ethnicity, he suggests a world where national and ethnic differences have been eradicated in an increasing internalization of American popular culture. (Wilcox 355)

Ironically, Jack's attention to the literal heterogeneous 'white noise' around him comes in the moment where Mink is no longer able to "receive the data or condition the context" (Lyotard 44).[18] Mink is suddenly at a loss without technological, prosthetic aids. Overrun by his fear of death and the failings of Dylar, he is susceptible to the words that Jack says to him. Unable to contextualize them, Mink must physically react to the phrases that Jack utters to him. When Jack mentions a flurry of incoming bullets, Mink cannot help but to curl himself up in an attempt to dodge them. As Mink is unable to differentiate the sound of a gun from an uttered phrase describing its effect, the scene enters another Lyotardian differend.[19] In this way, Jack and Mink

[17] Counteracting Wilcox's interpretation of this scene, it seems that if Jack were to lose identity and coherence in this encounter then he'd be unable to compensate the various forms of language used to recount the vengeance narrative. Quite oppositely, Jack is able to not only describe the weapon, but uses almost every known term for it in his recollection.

[18] Thus, it seems far more fitting to approach Mink as the 'postmodern condition' while the minute details that Jack is suddenly aware of come to represent the culture of postmodernity.

[19] Mink cannot hear the difference between Jack producing gunshot-like sounds and actual sounds of gunshots.

each become opposing phrase regimens: Jack stands as mutated modernism, while Mink, as stated by Wilcox, and becomes the phrase regimen of the postmodern condition. Due to their status as differend, they cannot relate to each other, and their discourse fails in awkward, and even humorous, ways. Lyotard argues that there is no standardized language database, but instead that definitions for phrases and sentences can be retrieved only by extensively studying their contextual uses. The thesis statement of Jean-Francois Lyotard's *Le Differend* captures this struggle:

> A phrase, even the most ordinary one, is constituted according to a set of rules (its regimen). There are a number of phrase regimens: reasoning, knowing, describing, recounting, questioning, showing, ordering, etc. Phrases from heterogeneous regimens cannot be translated from one into the other. They can be linked one onto the other in accordance with an end fixed by a genre of discourse. For example, dialogue links an ostension (showing) or a definition (describing) onto a question; at stake in it is the two parties coming to an agreement about the sense of a referent. Genres of discourse supply rules for linking together heterogeneous phrases, rules that are proper for attaining certain goals: to know, to teach, to be just, to seduce, to justify, to evaluate, to rouse emotion, to oversee....There is no "language" in general, except as the object of an Idea. (Lyotard xii)

Not only does their discourse highlight Lyotardian regimens, but Mink represents the postmodern condition in numerous ways. Firstly, he represents the Lyotardian notion of the computerization of knowledge. Lyotard claimed that knowledge (here as narrative) would be unable to survive 'unchanged' by the computerization of knowledge, which is exemplified through Jack’s newly mutated status. Lyotard, similar to his outlook on postmodern consumerism, saw this as an opportunity for growth, writing "the 'producers' and users of knowledge must now, and will have to, possess the means of translating into these languages whatever they want to invent or learn" (Lyotard 4).

Mink represents the 'producers,' reworking the knowledge of death and the fear of death, and translating it into a massively producible, sellable product: Dylar; Jack then, alongside

Babette, comes to represent a user, consumers promised happiness through a narratively marketed, purchasable product. In DeLillo's humorous synthetic, Mink becomes an explicit, exaggerated representation of the pervasive abilities of the consumerist narrative. He's spent so much time watching television and listening to the radio at the motel that he's become a dispensary of recycled quotes from various advertisements and programs.[20] Mink's locked into their dialogue, with his narrative decisively altered by intrusions of consumerism. Similarly, Babette's narrative was rewritten by Mink's promise of a product that could bring happiness. Her affair with Mink effectively helped to rewrite Jack's narrative into the scene at the motel, a scene that very much echoes DeLillo's view of contemporary violence as a 'sardonic response' to broken promises made to the consumer (in this instance Jack and Babette actually come together to represent the failed promise of the marketed Dylar).

While Wilcox argues that the motel scene implies Gladney's 'evacuation of self' in a crisis of postmodernity, the actions of Jack and his seemingly adjustable perception-of-self seem to imply something else entirely. Jack has a new understanding of himself and the Other following this scene, and he uses it to adapt himself to the following events. Just as Jack was suddenly enabled to mimic the Other that allowed him to steal his neighbor's car and become a love vigilante, he is once more enabled, after shooting Mink, to mimic a 'hero,' called for by the novel's genre shift in the third section.

In a moment of identity 'crisis,' it seems unlikely that Jack would be so quick to act in opposition to the reason for his initial visit to Mink, but Jack reacts immediately and is soon creating a lie about the cause for Mink's gunshot wound. Not only that, but he's soon on the way to the hospital with Mink in his car in a desperate attempt to save Mink's life. When considering

[20] This is an event that Jack has witnessed several times throughout the novel, first during Steffie's sleep, and later through his own narrative inside of *White Noise* as he lists the names of major credit card companies.

the reason for this, Jack ultimately decides to "get past disgust. Forgive the foul body. Embrace it whole" (DeLillo 136). As seen in the case with Mink, Jack is once more able to contextually picture the Other. It's as if the epiphany of the postmodern culture in the motel has enabled his ability to conjure the Other, and he reacts accordingly to it. In the matter of just a few pages Jack rewrites himself from love-struck murderer to the hierarchical hero, suddenly capable of pitying the villain, rather than envying or fearing him. And, following that Mink is the physical embodiment of the postmodern condition, Jack's decision to 'forgive the foul body' and 'embrace it whole' recalls the criticisms directed towards the philosophy of Lyotard: his willingness to overlook problematic issues in favor of embracing the postmodern progression (DeLillo 136).[21]

Jack's perception of himself amongst the 'networks' seems to indicate that he's finally able to manipulate the culture around him, and/or that he can manipulate himself around the culture: he's finally closing in on a grand narrative. Even if the narrative is only relevant to Jack, it provides a grand backdrop through which he can further understand his relation to those around him by estimating their difference from himself, whether physically or ideologically. This is evinced as Jack attempts to save Mink's life after receiving a gunshot to the wrist, noticing that Jack was "seeing him for the first time as a person" (DeLillo 136). As Jack tries to gather himself from the pain, he notices that the world seems dulled compared to the time of his entrance,

> The world collapsed inward, all those vivid textures and connections buried in mounds of ordinary stuff. I was disappointed. Hurt, stunned and disappointed. What had happened to the higher plane of energy in which I'd carried out my scheme? (DeLillo 136)

[21] This is a direct reference to Jim Powell's *Postmodernism for Beginners* in which he writes, "Lyotard celebrates the multiple, incompatible, heterogeneous, fragmented, contradictory and ambivalent nature of Postmodern society while Jameson distrusts and dislikes it" (Powell 34). Following Wilcox's interpretation of the motel scene as Jack's confrontation with the Postmodern society, his decision to attempt to rescue Mink only further supports the understanding of Jack as a mutated transfusion of (Post) modernism rather than simply a 'modern' character confronting a postmodern society.

In a matter of seconds Jack loses his ability to perceive and account for the Other. An important distinction is made, though. Jack does not claim that the Other disappears. In fact, he purports the opposite, but brings specific notice to his loss of the *ability to sort and decipher*, "Familiar little dancing specks. The extra dimensions, the super perceptions, were reduced to visual clutter, a whirling miscellany, meaningless," (DeLillo 136). Jack doesn't claim that the hyperreality has disappeared, or even that it has become less prevalent. Instead, it continues to whirl and whiz around him, but has become cluttered and Gladney is once more unable to decipher its meaning. Thus, Jack's claim that it is all "meaningless" refers only to his abilities to make use of it rather than referring to the inherent merit of the 'extra dimensions' around him. Jack's statement recalls a statement made by Murray earlier in the novel,

> Energy waves, incident radiation. All the letters and numbers are here, all the colors of the spectrum, all the voices and sounds, all the code words and ceremonial phrases. It is just a question of deciphering, rearranging, peeling off the layers of unspeakability. Not that we would want to, not that any useful purpose would be served. This is not Tibet. Even Tibet is not Tibet anymore. (DeLillo 22)

Murray's statement, now contextualized alongside Jack's, offers an insight into the effects of the imagism intertwined with their reality. The hyperreality that surrounds them beneath symbols and layers contains several 'networks' of images and referents, networks that require active sorting and deciphering to comprehend. Ultimately, though, Murray believes that one cannot decipher these networks, as it would lead to a sensory overload, an influx of data that stimulates awareness past coherence.[22] It is through this process of accounting for the Other that one becomes familiar with the layers underneath, and that through this familiarity is able to begin deciphering the meanings of these layers and their connections to human interaction, processing,

[22] This seems to be the direction in which Wilcox positions his argument. However, Jack's apparent coherence in the moment of encountering Mink strongly suggests otherwise, refuting both Wilcox and Murray.

and identity formation/discovery. Jack's ability to account for these networks and their binary natures is fleeting, and soon he's back to noticing data that he can't make sense of.

The ultra-awareness that had ultimately troubled him before is now a disappointment to Jack as he's shocked to see the data has left him, retreating to the furthest corners of his perception, and he's disappointed to see things return to 'ordinary.' Just as the rain stops, Gladney notices the heavy amounts of blood pouring from Mink, but he's seemingly shocked by it. In fact, Jack is shocked by the *reality* of the material surface that lies before him. Signifiers seem unreal to him now that he has noticed the interweaving signified data that exists around him. Worse yet, he can no longer visibly see the manifestations of these interwoven ideas and concepts; the veil is now as shocking to him as what he'd originally been so surprised to find underneath. Mink, on the other hand, is in staggering consciousness and battling between two control variants. On one hand he's fading in and out of the 'hyperreality' where he is controlled by the heterogeneous simulacra of the mediums, data, and technology around him; and on the other hand, he's fading in and out of the surface reality in which he is directly controlled by the signifiers of Jack,

> "Who shot you?"
> "You did. The gun is in your hand."
> ”What was the point I was trying to make?"
> "You were out of control. You weren't responsible. I forgive you."
> "Who are you, literally?"
> "A passerby. A friend. It doesn't matter."
> "Some millipedes have eyes, some do not." (DeLillo 136)

The slight control exercised by Jack over Mink echoes the loosening grip that Jack has over his perceptive abilities of the hyperreality and its Others. Further evidence of Jack's loosening grip comes during his next attempt to 'rewrite' himself from vengeance seeker to lifesaver. Jack, suddenly awakened to the psychic data flowing around him and successful thus far, attempts to extort this success in hopes of rewriting his attempted assassination. As Gladney drags Mink to the back of his car he notices that his, "humanity soared" (DeLillo 136). Jack not only writes

himself a new story to counteract the events of the previous pages, but through use of instantaneous identity-restructuring, he's able to make himself believe it. As Jack mutates into a new form of identity, his usability of those identity's traits becomes more and more ludicrous, and his ability to explain the variances in realities from identity to identity becomes more comical with each execution.

The variances clash as Jack stumbles from his car and into the Pentecostal church in Germantown to seek medical attention. Jack and J.A.K. are hard to distinguish at this point as the personalities and Others have taken turns driving his character's thought processes. Perhaps Gladney senses this as he's waiting to be treated because he begins to daydream about a hanging picture of Kennedy reuniting with the Pope in heaven. Gladney describes each figure, attributing vigor to the president and homeliness to the pope, and he sees the meeting of the two in heaven as an opportunity of conjoining the Others. He seemingly attributes the inability to account for the Other to both the tangibility of life, but also to the intangible and conceptual "psychic data" that creates barriers between people, their ideologies, and ultimately the narratives within themselves. Gladney reflects on his changing state and dreams of freedom from these limitations as he says,

> The President still vigorous after death. The Pope's homeliness a kind of radiance. Why shouldn't it be true? Why shouldn't they meet somewhere, advanced in time, against a layer of fluffy cumulus, to clasp hands? Why shouldn't we all meet, as in some epic of protean gods and ordinary people, aloft, well formed, shining? (DeLillo 137)

Immediately after the daydream, Jack asks the nun where heaven stands in modern theology, and if it still resides in the sky. The nun turns from him to examine the photograph and immediately responds to him angrily, taking Jack by surprise. The nun decries his outlook on what they supposedly believe, and as he asks her about angels, she is undoubtedly more skeptical than Jack

himself is. As the nun turns the question of belief back to Jack, he immediately squirms away from it, recalling Heinrich, saying that his beliefs aren't important in the grand scheme, but that hers are. Jack has attached a hierarchical structure to the faithful and the faithless, showing his reluctance to let go of the grand narrative, even as he's mutated his identity for justification through mini-narrative restructuring. The nun shatters this hierarchy for Jack as she refuses to discuss heaven and belief with him, instead relaying that they're considered pretend, even amongst the workers of the church.

Jack simply can't fathom that the religious structure is upheld by feigning religious devotees. The encounter with the nun acts as Jack's second face-to-face confrontation with the postmodern culture, and perhaps a more direct one. His attempts to pinpoint the nun's ideologies read thematically as an attempt for Jack to try and redeem himself in the court of someone else, and also as an attempt for Jack to once more flex his ability to manipulate the Other; he's attempting to seek redemption from the nun's assumptive beliefs, hoping that forgiveness can validate the identity changes he's made on the fly.

The nun does not validate these changes, however, as she instead provides Jack another binary within the conversation. Jack's assumption of the nun fulfilling a stereotype depicts his reluctance to let go of a grand narrative, and it also depicts his desire to distinguish himself from that same grand narrative, albeit with a good blessing. It isn't until this narrative is broken that Jack becomes aware, for the first time explicitly, of how crucial it is to his own thought process. The nun and Jack become a binary, and on each side, they represent the antitheses to each other,

> "You don't believe in heaven? A nun?"
> "If you don't, why should I?"
> "If you did, maybe I would."
> "If I did, you would not have to." (DeLillo 138)

The two are never able to connect on the subject, and their conversations become binaries that cancel each other out through differends. The nun explains that beliefs and ideas are created in spite of other beliefs and ideas, and that for nonbelievers to exist, they must first step towards distinguishing themselves from the Other: the believers.[23] One cannot exist without the other because one's existence directly implies the other and creates a dialectic of opposing ideologies that depend on each other to continue to exist in opposition, and to remain discoverable by what they are not. Jack is once more immediately distrusting of this ability to account for the Other. Unable to align himself away from or with faith, Jack is suddenly shattered that the faith he'd worked to distance himself from isn't actually there, and he's shocked to find out that he wishes it was. Jack is stuck in a state of stasis as the nun refers to him,

> "Our pretense is a dedication. Someone must appear to believe. Our lives are no less serious than if we professed real faith, real belief. As belief shrinks from the world, people find it more necessary than ever that someone believe. Wild-eyed men in caves. Nuns in black. Monks who do not speak. We are left to believe. Fools, children. Those who have abandoned belief must still believe in us. They are sure that they are right not to believe but they know belief must not fade completely. Hell is when no one believes. There must always be believers. Fools, idiots, those who hear voices, those who speak in tongues. We are your lunatics. We surrender our lives to make your nonbelief possible. You are sure that you are right but you don't want everyone to think as you do. There is no truth without fools. We are your fools, your madwomen, rising at dawn to pray, lighting candles, asking statues for good health, long life." (DeLillo 138)

Jack's distrust of the nun arises at the nun's sudden Othering of herself. In this moment, the nun is characterized as being aesthetically akin to what Jack expects, but as she speaks she comes to represent *her own* Other. Transitioning from Jack's overwhelming

[23] In other words, individual identities are formed through a process of sorting and deciphering the beliefs of others, both at a universal (grand) level of narrative and at an individual (mini) level of narrative, which are then compared against our own. It is through the process of deciphering Otherness that one comes to find the location of one's beliefs, made possible only by discovering where the beliefs *do not* lie. This is done through comparatives against each layer of narrative: societal, consumer, companionship, relationship, self-identity, and lastly, the nega-narrative.

data reception (and eventual manipulation) at Mink's hotel, the scene at the Church represents a parallel narrative case, only this time Jack is made witness to someone else manipulating the 'psychic data.'

This manipulation occurs in the form of the nun's *dedicated pretense*: for her, there is no change in the severity of her dedication, even if it is to a fabricated narrative. Instead, the nun understands the role of belief to exist in a binary state. Similar to the consumerist narrative threads seen earlier in the novel, the nun's statements seem to ground their argument in a similar concept of universality that seeks to create/trace an association between *buyer* and *seller*, between *individual* and *universal* identity through narrative. The nun describes her occupation in terms of belittlement and ridicule, but simultaneously creates a narrative in her explanation that not only justifies, but directly equalizes both identities in the transaction of faith. The faithless are enabled to exist and formulate definitive nonbelief because they are formed *in opposition to* their Other: believers. While this relationship is understood to also have a reciprocal effect (believers may be just as certain that the faithless are wrong in their convictions and thus reaffirmed in their own), it is the nun's open discussion of *selling* one's faith that so directly affects Jack. In the way that advertising sells narratives of products and those that buy them, the nun's wardrobe not only sells her presumed narrative, but also reaffirms Jack in his own.

Jack's reaction to the nun's exposition highlights the fear that he has of intrusive forces shaping his own narrative. It isn't the nun's lack of faith that bothers him as much as it is the idea that Jack's lack of belief could only develop *in response* to her aesthetic narrative, rather than being of his own conjuring. What's even more shocking to Jack is that the nun is not only able to embody both Others simultaneously, but that she can also

form an individual identity from these two oppositional outlooks. The nun's uncensored speech makes explicit a process that is hinted towards in the earlier parts of the work: self-censorship.

The process of self-censorship can be seen frequently throughout the novel as characters attempt to hide or disclose information to another, a process that Jack struggles with. Gladney's desperate, will-stop-at-nothing attitude towards creating and maintaining, (and eventually hiding the inadequacies of), his alternate personality J.A.K. highlight his struggle to understand what can/can't and should/should not be expressed. This is emphasized in Chapter 7 of the novel as Jack discusses the open dialogue that he maintains with Babette,

> Babette and I tell each other everything. I have told everything, such as it was at the time, to each of my wives. There is more to tell, of course, as marriages accumulate. But when I say I believe in complete disclosure I don't mean it cheaply, as anecdotal sport or shallow revelation. It is a form of self-renewal and a gesture of custodial trust. Love helps us develop an identity secure enough to allow itself to be placed in another's care and protection. […] In these night recitations we create a space between things as we felt them at the time and as we speak them now. (DeLillo 30)

I'm interested in tying this process of speech regulation to the literary concept of the unnarratable. In Gerald Prince's essay "The Disnarrated" he writes of the unnarratable, "that which, *according to a given narrative*, cannot be narrated or is not worth narrating either because it transgresses a law (social, authorial, generic, formal) or because it defies the powers of a particular narrator[…]" (Prince). The nun's uncensored speech about faith (or the lack of it) is shocking, and almost appalling, to Jack because it upsets an unspoken social law (narrative) about members of religious organizations: they are supposed to be religious. While the nun has no problem defying the social law of pretense, Babette refuses to do the same as wife, instead relying on cold, scientific

discourse to explain her *unnarratable* infidelity to Jack. For Jack this is unacceptable considering that he prides his relationship on having an open dialogue, but even further it is this open discourse that *allows* Jack to create a space to reflect in, the same subconscious space in which Jack creates his identity).

Thus, the disnarrated measured against the narrated becomes Jack's greatest struggle in the pages of *White Noise.* Jack's understanding of identity changes as he encounters new people and situations that force him to either expose or withdraw himself, to create or to discover parts of himself on the fly. Jack's measurement of honesty comes in the form of a zero-sum game throughout the novel, as he measures his accountability to honesty in terms of what he receives from others, whether this is in a social or personal setting. The *Oxford English Dictionary* defines zero-sum as, "in the theory of games, applied to a game in which the sum of the winnings of all the players is always zero" (zero-sum, *adj.*). This is highlighted in the moments of unspoken tension between characters and theories throughout the novel. In scenes between Jack and Murray, Jack is often frustrated by Murray's constant lack of self-censorship, such as in the scene shortly after Murray attempts to describe to Jack his theory of *déjà vu* when Jack states,

> "I'd like to lose interest in myself," I told Murray. "Is there any chance of that happening?"
> "None. Better men have tried."
> "I guess you're right."
> "It's obvious."
> "I wish there was something I could do. I wish I could out-think the problem."
> "Work harder on your Hitler," he said.
> I looked at him. How much did he know? (DeLillo 152)

Similarly, when Jack encounters the SIMUVAC worker, he is terrified that the computer is able to pull up his alternate identity. As he questions the man confirming his "situation" he finds himself made uneasy at the parts of him being exposed without his consent, even folding his arms in an attempt to remain closed off, "He looked at me carefully. I stood with my arms

folded, staring over his head toward the front door of the barracks. To look at him would be to declare my vulnerability" (DeLillo 141). And yet again it may be seen again when Jack and Murray take turns discussing Hitler and Elvis, "It was not a small matter. We all had an aura to maintain, and in sharing mine with a friend I was risking the very things that made me untouchable" (DeLillo 74).

It may be beneficial to consider Wilcox' essay here once more. Wilcox's interpretation of Jack as a modernist character in a postmodern world still does not seem to accurately capture the tension in Jack's transformation throughout the work, though I believe it is because the examination is focused on the wrong aspect. There is a definitive tension between Jack, his society, his family, and Murray, though it seems to be a cumulative tension. Considering Jack's struggle of self-censorship in light of the novel's attention to the transition from modernism to postmodernism, and its attention to intrusive narratives, it seems unlikely that Jack is a stand-in for modernism. Perhaps instead Jack actually *becomes* the tension of *how to form* and *what to include* in a narrative as the society is shifting from one mode of storytelling to an entirely new form.

Gerald Prince writes that,

> […] the hallmark of narrative is assurance. Narrative, which is etymologically linked to knowledge, lives in certainty (this happened then that; this happened because of that; this happened and it was related to that) and dies from (sustained) ignorance and indecision (Prince 4)

If narrative lives in certainty, then identity lives in doubt. Throughout *White Noise* Jack is constantly adapting himself or rewriting parts of himself to blend into the environment around him. What's more is that he actually adapts his identity to the narratives around him, though seeks to avoid being exposed at all costs, such as the intrusive narrative of technology (SIMUVAC) and consumerism (Mr. Grey) seen throughout the novel. These intrusions have

profound effects on Jack, as can be seen in the third section of the work and allow him to be read as an entirely different character throughout each section of the work (though it's truly just Jack's adaptive/morphing personality changing in front of the reader). It isn't just a self-absorbed interest that Jack has in crafting stories, however, as can be seen in his fascination with storytelling during the airborne toxic event,

> The toxic event had released a spirit of imagination. People spun tales, others listened spellbound. There was a growing respect for the vivid rumor, the most chilling tale. We were no closer to believing or disbelieving a given story than we had been earlier. But there was a greater appreciation now. We began to marvel at our own ability to manufacture awe. (DeLillo 153)

Jack's obsession with storytelling is seen in all parts of the novel, even in his early interactions with Babette, though the tension is slightly different. There is a hanging awkwardness on the page during their casual conversations, especially in their moments of discussing what kind of material to read to arouse each other. This is the same scene in which Jack discusses his open dialogue with Babette, the same scene in which Jack discusses love as a place to develop an identity. This is reinforced by Jack's constantly negative interactions with/discussions of his previous wives (and eventually Babette, once she's told him about Willie Mink). In the first section of the novel, Jack summarizes his relationship with Babette as, "I've gotten so used to her that I would feel miserably incomplete. We are two views of the same person. I would spend the rest of my life turning to speak to her. No one there, a hole in space and time" (DeLillo 101).

Jack's tense narrative identity is often relieved as he's able to expose himself to Babette during their nightly discussions. It is through this daily interaction with his wife that he is able to sort out and tell everything to his wife. Jack keeps nothing for himself, or if he does, it often reads strangely, as in the scene where he attempts to describe her hair. However, once Jack loses the open dialogue with Babette, his narrative function changes entirely. Jack then becomes lost in

himself, in the art of storytelling, in the story of death, and in the tension of narrating his alternate personality against his real identity. Why? Jack is unable to calculate himself without the assistance of Babette's nightly discussions. Instead, Jack is either entirely expositional or entirely hidden from those around him, even Babette and his children. In his novel *Point Omega* Don DeLillo writes, "If you reveal everything, bare every feeling, ask for understanding, you lose something crucial to your sense of yourself. You need to know things the others don't know. It's what no one knows about you that allows you to know yourself" (DeLillo).

It is this very same notion that comes to highlight Jack's struggle throughout the novel. Jack, as a character of narrative tension, is unable to perform the process of sorting, telling, and keeping parts of his identity. Instead, he spends the novel looking for confirmations in other characters about who he knows himself to be. Early on in the novel, Jack seeks confirmation through the use of an ATM machine,

> The figure on the screen roughly corresponded to my independent estimate, feebly arrived at after long searches through documents, tormented arithmetic. Waves of relief and gratitude flowed over me. The system had blessed my life. I felt its support and approval. The system hardware, the mainframe sitting in a locked room in some distant city. What a pleasing interaction. I sensed that something of deep personal value, but not money, not that at all, had been authenticated and confirmed. […] The system was invisible, which made it all the more impressive, all the more disquieting to deal with. But we were in accord, at least for now. The networks, the circuits, the streams, the harmonies. (DeLillo 46)

As the novels narrative grows, Jack's understanding of what can and can't be said grows alongside his understanding of the intrusive role of technology and society to his narrative. Further, Jack himself grows with the story. In each person that Jack is unable to confirm his identity in, he grows more reliant upon himself. This can be seen in the case of Babette and Jack's desire to get revenge on Willie Mink. It's even noticeable in the case of the German professor, J.A.K.'s ultimate saving grace, who Jack ultimately grows dissatisfied with, knowing

that he will have to confront his inability to speak German (conveniently taking place at the church where he drops off Mink). It is in the third section's scene at the hotel (the scene in which Wilcox argues that Jack is unable to manipulate or cohere to the data around him) that Jack finally learns how to keep parts of a narrative (and parts of his identity) to himself. This is made memorable to Jack, ironically, through a note he receives in the mail about his new bank code,

> WARNING. Do not write down your code. Do not carry your code on your person. REMEMBER. You cannot access your account unless your code is entered properly. Know your code. Reveal your code to no one. Only your code allows you to enter the system. (DeLillo 295)

This mentality helps Jack to begin writing his own narrative of who he is as he begins to take on his quest of vengeance. It continues to carry with him to the moment of coherence in the hotel as he understands what parts of the narrative he's willing and not willing to tell Mink (such as not telling him that the gun sounds he's making are not actually gunshots). Jack's understanding of manipulating narratives continues on into the last chapter of the novel as he discusses his doctor requesting a scan of his body. Jack states, "But I am afraid of the imaging block. Afraid of its magnetic fields, its computerized nuclear pulse. Afraid of what it knows about me. I am taking no calls" (DeLillo 325).

This is an interesting change from the Jack seen earlier, seeking any information possible about his "condition" in the SIMUVAC. Instead, Jack is content to manage his own narrative, one that is free of the intrusive technology and its details about him. Jack is suddenly able to manage what parts of himself he will expose and what parts he will not by consenting to or rejecting interactions/conversations with people and technology around him. This doesn't last for long, however, as Jack becomes aware that technology is rapidly growing more capable of seeing

through him. Jack finds comfort in knowing that he isn't the only one exposed to this kind of examination, as it is everyone that must face this,

> But in the end it doesn't matter what they see or think they see. The terminals are equipped with holographic scanners, which decode the binary secret of every item, infallibly. This is the language of waves and radiation, or how the dead speak to the living. And this is where we wait together, regardless of age, our carts stocked with brightly colored goods. A slowly moving line, satisfying, giving us time to glance at the tabloids in the racks. Everything we need that is not food or love is here in the tabloid racks. The tales of the supernatural and the extraterrestrial. The miracle vitamins, the cures for cancer, the remedies for obesity. The cults of the famous and the dead. (DeLillo 326)

Recalling the zero-sum game, Jack is once again equalized to those around him, and finds his identity in the grand narrative of technology's inability to use narrative. However, the novel's ending lines imply that even as Jack has now learned the importance of narratives, how they relate to his identity, and the way that they are manipulated in current culture, there are still abounding narrative threats, even in the local supermarket.

After extensively analyzing *White Noise,* it seems apparent that the relationship between Don DeLillo and Jack Gladney is one of multiple uses. DeLillo uses Jack to explore the tension between the novel's two interpretations of plots and their relation to the formation of a coherent identity. DeLillo synthetically and thematically uses Gladney's identity faults to study and evince the problems that arise in transitioning identity from one dominant narrative mode to another. It is through this use that Gladney becomes a transfusion of these ideas, rather than identifiably representing one side more honestly. This struggle is manifested throughout the novel's calculated encounters between Gladney's crumbling narrative identity and the intrusive narratives of society, such as consumerism, technology, and class identification. It is these same intrusions that so masterfully explore the attacks (both explicit, and more troubling, masked) on narrative formation, and how these attacks problematize the process of not only self-identification but

also self-censorship and open expression (sorting, telling, and keeping) in light of that identification.

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